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Conservative Farmers Movements and Right-Wing Populism in Contemporary India

Divya Jain¹

Abstract

This paper argues that Bhartiya Kisan Sangh (BKS), a conservative farmers' movement, although has managed to maintain an overall agenda of 'majoritarian cultural nationalism,' there are fault lines seen between them and the right-wing Modi government. This can be seen partly in the increasing strength of BKS's demands such as higher minimum support price for farm produce, ban of genetically modified seeds, lower interest rates on loans, better health and education facilities and so on. These rising demands stand in direct opposition to the policies of the Modi government, a regime that BKS is generally ideologically aligned with. Right-wing populist governments in various parts of the world have important social base in the countryside, such as Trump and rural America. India has a similar situation, with Modi and the Indian countryside, in the form of powerful conservative farmers' movements like BKS. But my study will show that there are fundamental tensions and contradictions between the Modi authoritarian populist regime and its rural social base. What these are, and how these get played out has been the key inquiry of this study.

Keywords: right-wing/conservative farmers' movements, authoritarian populism, India

¹ This research paper with the same title is a part of the dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment for obtaining the degree of Masters of Arts in Development Studies with Majors in Agrarian, Food and Environment Studies at International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague during the year 2016-17.

Introduction

This research paper critically engages with the contemporary phenomenon of right-wing authoritarian populism which has been on a rise globally. This is done with the case of Bhartiya Kisan Sangh² a right wing farmers' movement which finds a close tie with the national ruling party i.e. Bhartiya Janta Party as they drive their ideology from the same camp. Situated in the Indian case, this paper builds on the background of 'authoritarian populism' in the West – with Trump coming in power, the popularity of Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in Netherlands, AfD in Germany, and a similar trend in other parts of the world like Duterte in the Philippines or past Thaksin regime in Thailand. Bhagavan (2016) rightly argues that Trump represents a bigger pattern in the West although 'authoritarian populism' is rising in far more many places.

The key question this paper addresses is what are the synergies and contradictions between and within a populist force i.e. Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and its rural support base and why is this so. The paper uses the framework of right-wing authoritarian populism to deal with the proposed question. The paper analyses the demands of the movements and how it differs or contradicts from the right wing Modi-BJP regime and in what ways it cuts across the demands of other movements. The alliance of BKS and Bhartiya Janta Party is thus, full of contradictions and synergies. Perhaps, the reasons that bring them together may actually be the very reasons for their differences and, possibly, fallout.

Defining Right Wing Authoritarian Populism

Hall looks at the emergence of authoritarian populism in a crisis situation as redefining 'discipline' and 'social order' or creating 'popular morality', 'popular ideologies constitute', a kind of 'strategic terrain' actively shaped by 'organized political and ideological forces. This resulting in organizing actions and behaviour of the masses in a way which lets the political force implement and produce new forms of consent. This does not necessarily involve creating new structures but 'renovating' the already existing systems. Engaging with Laclau's work, he argues that while the dialogue on 'populism' and 'democracy' cannot be attached to a certain class and is not neutral in that sense – it is absolutely unlikely that outcomes and practices of ideological struggle remain 'class-free' (1980:157-187). Nevertheless, it could be said that authoritarian populism is not a fixed idea and is articulated very differently in different political conditions and contexts.

Hall (1980) argues that Thatcherism worked because it operated directly on manufacturing 'popular ideologies' through working on the traditional forms of government in a direction of authoritarianism. It worked systematically on the 'popular morality' as it got the maximum acceptance through it. According to him, it is the 'radical right' that works on the margins of government power and systems whereby it creates 'new equilibrium' between preserving the old knowledge or systems only with strongly altering them. Thus, with riding on the old systems and modifying them, the far right manages to get legitimacy from the masses and is capable of receiving popular consent through its engagement with everyday economic, social and cultural aspects. This could travel through historical situations and specific 'conjunctures' (Ibid.).

Suggesting an explanation for the right wing authoritarianism of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), Ahmad articulates that their "commitment to creating a cultural homogeneity out of this ocean of diversities, and to translate that cultural homogeneity into a unified political will, means that it wishes to become both church and state simultaneously. That ambition is at the heart of its fight against secular civility and the specific content of its authoritarianism"

² Bhartiya Kisan Sangh (BKS) is a right wing farmers' movement that was founded by Dattopantji Thengdi in 1979. He was a known nationalist who aimed for the preservation of Hindu culture and rural society. The movement currently claims to have 20 million farmer members in the country. It is affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), the biggest and strongest Hindu right wing outfit in the country. The Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) is the electoral arm of the same.

(2016). He further questions how a far right political party can legitimately rule with its own fascist agendas through liberal democratic institutions.

As Hall explains, economic crisis, education, media, and law and order are some crucial spaces where ‘right’ notions have been well established. For instance, through ‘politically-motivated teachers’ in the classroom, and fake stories of ‘adulteration’ of school standards and schools becoming violent spaces due to allowing immigrants to study. He adds that media plays a crucial role by sensationalising these beliefs. He firmly argues that authoritarian populism is an “exceptional form of capitalist state - which unlike classical fascism has retained (though not all) the formal representative institution in place, and which at the same time has been able to construct around itself an active popular consent” (1979:14-20). Thus, the “radical right” just does not happen, but it is a result of continuous political and cultural effort and conquer within the existing and sometimes new formations. This, as Hall argues, has the potential of reordering the system where authoritarian populism “is a response to the crisis and a crisis in itself”. This gets built on the already existing traditions, communal tensions, and crises of unemployment, poverty and agricultural prices, and so on. Hall aptly reflects “that restructuring of the order works on the ground of already constituted social practices and lived ideologies. It wins space there by constantly drawing on these elements which have secured over time a traditional resonance and left their traces in popular inventories” (1979:20).

It is possible that Hall (1979) predicted a future trend that we see now, when he argued “swing to the Right”, and considered it as not a ‘temporary’ or ‘short term’ dis-balance of political forces. With reference to India Vanaik points out that ‘Hindu extremism’ is not new and has existed since the 1920’s, within and without national movements. However, what is recent is the wider public receptiveness of these right wing ideas (2001:52).

How have the authoritarian structure framed their populist ideologies and normalised its political styles? Suggesting a form of Thatcherism, Vanaik elaborates that the BJP has focussed on dropping ‘its own people’ with strategic posting in decisions making units of education, social science research, media and so on (2001:60). This certainly contributes to altering the knowledge and experiences of the general population in a ‘rightward’ shift. Right wing authoritarian populism, hence, is a form of restructuring of state-society, state-capital, and society-society (with its heterogeneity) relations where the objective is a more powerful, controlling. In contemporary India, it is the case of more powerful and controlling government through market liberalism and Hindu fascism (see Vanaik 2001, 2017).

Nature of populism and contradictions within – The Indian case

From the nature of campaigning and the BJP’s victory with Narendra Modi’s candidature in the 2014 Union government elections, to his ongoing tenure, it will not be an exaggeration to associate Modi with a ‘regime’, because he and his governing rules have been identified with some key patterns and structures. Coming from a far right wing party with a background of Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh training, he is identified as an authoritarian Hindu nationalist, while paradoxically also a huge globalist at the same time. According to Forbes 2016 ranking of ‘the world’s most powerful people’, Modi secured a position amongst top ten leaders along with Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump.

Table 1: Features of the Modi Populism

Modi	Neo liberal – pro privatisation, business corporates
	Gained huge popularity in countryside but also amongst middle and business elite class
	Hindu Nationalist, nationalist and a globalist
	“protection of sacred cow” – violation of minority rights and livelihoods

	Encourage industrialization and foreign funding/investments
	Decline in public expenditure, more corporate funding
	‘Wide appeal’ , ‘common touch’

Modi came to power partly due to his social base in the countryside amidst his populist posturing. This is overlapping and coinciding with the rise of what Achin Vanaik (2017) calls ‘Hindu authoritarianism’. But since coming to power, the Modi government has evolved dynamically. In some ways it is ‘populist’ because of its anti-corruption, anti-poverty, development and “*acche din*”³ rhetoric to create a popular image for the masses with the help of media appropriations. In other ways, it shows ‘authoritarian’ tendencies with the increasing cow vigilantism, sudden demonetisation across the country, making Unique Identification (UID) cards mandatory, o repeated reference to ‘Hindustan or Hindu nation state’, allowing the entry of GMOs, and so on.

Vanaik argues that Modi’s and BJP’s important agenda of establishing a Hindu Nation State has been penetrating through ‘violence, state repression and censorship’. He puts it as a “long march through the institutions”, where he looks at the Election Commission of India, the Supreme Court, the public education sector being appropriated to create “Hindutva’s hegemony” with an increasing focus on creating fear for the ‘dissenters’ (2017). Modi’s social support base has been a huge share of countryside voters, but his populist image has both catered and cut across middle class and urban elites. A form of “flagging nationalism” (Bhatia, 2016), a “cultural politics of animal welfares” imposed in the system of rural communities (Srinivasan,2016), and new cultural narratives being created on the foundation of ‘othering’ and ‘hate’ (Dutta, 2017) impacting lives and livelihoods of the poor farmers, pastoralists in the countryside and smaller towns. Referring to the long effort of Bhartiya Janta Party and Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh, Ahmad building on Gramsci’s work argues that ‘secure religious-cultural dominance take advantage of the existing institutions as they do not “necessarily obstruct the power of the extreme right” and builds even stronger political power “combining religio-cultural conservatism and majoritarian violence with neoliberal capitalism within the belly of imperialism, as well as liberal democratic institutions of governance domestically” (2017).

Banaji rightly argued that the RSS had never encouraged electoral participation or the “leadership cult” – however, this changed with the popularity rise of Modi during the election campaign itself. This has led to identification of ‘self-sustaining extremism in place (as Holmes argues in case of Europe) which is very dangerous for both public institutions and appropriating people’s belief and cultural system (2013) – what Hall also calls a “organised fascism” (1979).

Contradictions between the Modi regime and the farmers’ movements

By situating Bhartiya Kisan Sangh in a right-wing authoritarian populist framework, this paper highlights the key differences and similarities between the movement and the ruling right wing party. There have been widespread farmers’ protests all over the country since 2017. Loan waiver, indebtedness, better minimum support prices (MSP), electricity and irrigation have been some of the main demands across states and movements.

Bhartiya Kisan Sangh (BKS) too has been in news recently for protests against the nationalist BJP-led union government and state-level protests, including in Rajasthan where the fieldwork for this study was conducted. There has been resentment both against Prime Minister Modi and the state’s Chief Minister, who also belongs to the same party. BKS has even joined the newly formed All India Farmers’ Coordination Committee which represents farmers’ organizations across the political

³ Good days are coming” BJP’s popular slogan during 2014 elections campaign.

spectrum. This surprising stance of the BKS contradicts with the political camp it supposedly drives its ideology from. The table below lays out the main contradictions and points of synergy between BKS and Bhartiya Janta Party.

Table 2: Contradictions between BJP and BKS

Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP)	Bhartiya Kisan Sangh (BKS)
Pro -free market and pro-liberalisation	Anti-free market, pro “Swadeshi” (indigenous)
Pro-increase in agricultural productivity	Pro-increase in productivity only if profitable prices are ensured
Withdrew bonus and abolish Minimum Support Prices soon	Improved and ensured Minimum Support Price
Pro-GMO	Anti-GMO and promoting organic agriculture
Allowed 100% FDI in food processing and animal husbandry	BKS is firmly protesting against this and finds it a threat to rural farmers
Pro-advanced infrastructure, technology and urbanization	Anti-urbanization, westernization, Pro indigenous science, pro technology which is financially suitable and user friendly
Pro- privatisation of seeds etc.	Opposing it and wants government to ensure supply of healthy seeds
Pro import substitution of food and agri-products	Pro export and self-sustainability within the country with food consumption.
Neglected ecological and environment sustainability concerns	Ecological balance and protection of all agro climatic zone considered crucial
Cow as sacred and protection is must	Cow as sacred (from the leaders)
Hindu Nationalist	Hindu Nationalist
Authoritarian populist	Agrarian populism and ‘village as one community’

The newspaper and media reports are flooded with the massive farmers’ protests that have taken place across India after the 2014 elections and are currently ongoing. The sever fallout of agricultural prices, effects of demonetisation, free trade and duty free imports, rejection of exports, GMOs, push under the Modi government, rural joblessness, heavy farm debts have been some of the important factors influencing the unrest. This has been an unexpected reality for many who believed in the Modi tale which ensured a pro-poor, uncorrupted government.

Interestingly, farmers from the right wing movements like Bharat Kisan Sangh and Swadeshi Jagran Manch have protested against the cotton prices in Gujarat, and other agricultural agendas which are being proposed by party of their affiliation. It was recently flagged by both Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh and BKS that there was potential damage to the Modi government’s image because of recent decisions — “strategic sale and divesting management control in over two dozen public sector undertakings (PSUs), commercialisation of genetically modified mustard and failure to respond

appropriately to agrarian distress” (Pandey, 2016). The Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh’s head, India’s biggest trade union also from the RSS and BJP camp has argued that on the labor and economic front the BJP government has been like another Congress (United Progressive Alliance) government and the other changes are just “cosmetic” (Philip, 2017).

During one of the gatherings of BKS, it was shared that “Bhartiya Kisan Sangh will not be scared of any political party. Have you ever seen any political person or minister here? We are farmers’ guards and we are here to protect them. Our objective is not to make any party but only to support farmers. BKS should become a name that the government is scared of. (Jugdish, state leader, 2017, speech).⁴

Bhartiya Kisan Sangh, has been critical of green revolution and neo liberal policies instituted in the early 1990s. It has ideological differences with the BJP on many grounds, as I empirically argue in this paper. Agricultural policies under Modi government have been disapproved precisely because they have deepened the crisis - the crisis of agricultural prices, debt, food security and unemployment. Corporates penetration through seeds, technology, herbicides and other chemicals, or in the form of corporate farming, has been condemned and rejected by BKS farmers, and as well as movement leaders. Similarly, land acquisition for the stated purpose of creating skilled jobs has been received with scepticism by farmers. The import and export policy of the government is also regarded as unfavourable to farmers. It was pointed out during the fieldwork that the import of rice and wheat has led to reduction in prices (lesser than one third of the earlier price) in the domestic market.

Modi ensured that farmers’ issues will be resolved by 2022 and rates for crops will increase by 50 percent, however, the prices have only gone down and instead the debt might double. There is no faith in politicians amongst farmers or that the government will do any good. It is encouraged that farmers take some initiatives. For instance, farmers’ should not sell their produce at lower rates than Minimum Support Price (Jugdish, 2017). The veteran leaders specially who have been a part of BKS since 1980s argued that Congress has never acknowledged them and that with the BJP, it is at least possible to have a discussion (Ambubhai 2017, personal interview).⁵ However, in interviews in Rajasthan, which is also a more electorally contested space between BJP and Indian National Congress, it was argued that BKS would protest against any government, including Modi and the BJP, as the farmers were being pushed in poverty by both the parties.

“Everyone behaves in the same way once in power. BKS protests whenever is needed and not based on who is in the power. We are sometimes questioned that why do we protest – when we know BJP members, why do not we just enter in their offices, when we have access. The truth is these ministers do not listen to anyone and do not belong to anyone” (Suhas, Agriculturist 2017, personal interview⁶). Farmers and BKS leaders differed in their opinion of how BKS and Bhartiya Janta Party were politically linked and to what extent BKS was influenced by BJP and vice versa. While across interviews it was shared that the BKS protests against both the national parties and works as a separate entity, the BJP was still considered as a nationalist party and there have been lot of expectations from Modi, given his popular image as a strong, nationalist leader. However, his policies are being realised as anti-farmers and thus, being challenged. “We had many expectations from Modi but he has just ruined our hopes, they are talking about so many big schemes but we do not see anything around” (FGD 2017).⁷ Thus, it is possible that even the nature of Hindu nationalism is not the same across and within these organizations; BKS farmers or local leaders seem more inclined towards practicing Hindu culture, with evidence of some ‘fascism’ at state and national levels, while the BJP plays more of the Hindu majoritarian card.

Hansen argues that “looking closer at social movements one finds that they are composite phenomena comprising many social relations, world-views and identities, about which there is constant negotiation. In short, they are volatile and changeable structures. (cited in Lindberg, 1994:100). These

⁴ Farmers sabha (gathering) in Kethun, Rajasthan

⁵ Gandhinagar, Gujarat

⁶ Udaipur

⁷ Arjunpura

contestations and identity formation are also very different and constitute one of the important limitations of classical Marxist literature, where articulation has been mainly around class struggle against the state. Hasan argues that there has been silence and no counter movement from the peasants and the movements' leaders against Hindutva and the dominant right wing politics. Moreover, across some of these movements, there has been an ideological encouragement of populism of different kinds, whether it is to do with standing against westernization or emphasizing peasants as one identity. (1994:189). While this holds largely true, any form of ideological solidarity between BKS and BJP has been compromised with removal of bonuses to farmers, not procuring enough agricultural produce supported under minimum support prices, high level of inflation, and most importantly, the increase in import substitution. These policy steps have not gone well with farmers in the countryside, leading to massive agitations.

There are differing opinions of BKS' association with the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh within the movement's leadership. Some farmers accuse BKS to be running as per the larger agendas of RSS and not being firm with BJP leaders and farmers' demands (FGD 2017)⁸. Aman Lal, who is a village level leader and has been in BKS for twenty years, shared that it was argued recently with the national and state leaders that Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and BKS should be kept completely separated as they will never understand the plight of farmers and their families. RSS prioritises the nation's creation first rather than people. He added that while BJP was separate from BKS – they ought to be kept in touch for farmers' benefit with a clear agenda of farmers' interests and not to get merged in them, since “movements have to compromise on some aspects whether it is BJP or Congress” (personal interview, 2017). It raises an important question on how and to what extent a movement with a prior ideological cohesion can have the space of dissent and open resistance, particularly from the most marginalised farmers and village level leaders, against its 'own' political party and authoritarian leader.

While this paper focuses only on faultiness between BKS and BJP, through the research I have also argued that there are conflicts of interests within the movement as well. This is because the top leaders largely being appointed by Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh with a core agenda of creation of a Hindu nation state, while farmers' demands not necessarily are around the Hindutva agenda but more have access to better prices, government facilities and quality of life. BKS is principally based on agroecology and environment friendly sustainable agricultural practices. Referring to a larger politics against the third world and creating dependence, Hukam Chand⁹ argued that seeds and pesticides companies have been killing the country and its farmers. He further explained that it was after the Second World War that the remaining raw materials to be used for making bombs were promoted as fertilizers and sent to countries like India. “First they sent diseases with their inputs and then their medicines”. He added that due to poisonous impact of these agricultural inputs over the years, the quality of Indian agricultural products has drastically deteriorated, which has led to rejection of a lot of India's exports, including from European countries. He added that BKS considers centralization of agricultural policies as a mechanism that only benefits the agricultural companies. One of the aims of the movement, infact, has been to draw attention to take care of the 127 agro climatic zones of the country, as this is believed to be catalyst for stopping migration and reducing poverty (see also Thegdi, 2002). Hence, there has been a conscious stand against modern science and westernization and move towards 'indigenous practices'. While, this too reflect a populist nature of the movement itself my research showed that it ignored identity politics and class differentiation within the movement and considered farmers as one entity.

Contested authoritarian populism

Fox (1993:10) argues that “the government's capacity to carry out distributive reforms is depended on the beneficiaries' autonomous mobilization in defence of their interests against anti-reform

⁸ Rasalpur

⁹ An organic farmer, trainer and one of the old BKS leaders since the founding years in the 1980s.

elements within the state itself.” This does get represented in the recent agitations where farmers from BKS and other movements have resisted against agricultural policies and losses farmers have incurred, BKS farmers along with other movements have protested through rallies, road blockages, hunger strikes, etc. They have come out in big numbers in states like Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, which have electorally been the strongest BJP states. Right-wing movements like *Swadeshi Jagran Manch* and BKS have continuously protested against Monsanto and GMO crops, which have been a major concern for left wing movements as well, along with opposition for other neoliberal policies.

As Scoones et al. argue that “contemporary populist politics are far from uniform and are often contradictory: for example shoring up exclusionary and even violent political power, while selectively offering progressive policies, whether free tertiary education in the Philippines, land reform in South Africa or Zimbabwe, or targeted investment in rural communities in the US, Europe or India” (2017). I have argued in this study that authoritarian populism is not a singular or ‘unified’ ideas and thus, could be used in different social and political contexts. “Authoritarian populism’ (AP) has never been intended to, could not possibly have been intended and—I would claim—has never been used in my work, to produce a general explanation of Thatcherism. It addresses, directly, the question of the forms of hegemonic politics. In doing so, it deliberately and self-consciously foregrounds the political-ideological dimension” (Hall, 1985). With reference to Modi and some other global leaders it is argued that while they are considered as authoritarian figures, their leadership characteristics are very different from each other and cannot be put into one category. Some are more fascist than others. Some are more diplomatic like Modi while somebody like Trump is blunt about getting “America first” catering to the demands and needs of the white Americans and the middle class. These leaders are difficult to be put into one kind of authoritarian populism and cut across different characteristics.

Bernstein argues that there exists many kinds of populism and agrarian populism and a distinction should be made between them with their key elements, intellectual form, people but also by the history of it and some specific circumstances, political strengths and dynamics they occur in (2009:69). Looking at current trends globally Bhagavan (2016) argues few key factors in occurrence of a radical populist politics – the economic globalization, the emergence and taking over of huge, non-state multinational corporate actors, the globalization of conflicts and its articulation as a long war on terror and the overall crisis in public health and environmental threats globally.

The right wing populism combined with economic crisis in the countryside has contributed to the rise of these leaders. The same social base is capable of launching resistance against the hegemony of these leaders as argued in the case of BKS and BJP. As Laclau (2005) inspires that “reclaiming populism, and its performative dimensions and ‘dangerous logics’, can thus be central to the creation of ‘radical democracy’ and the struggle against the normalisation of authoritarianism”. I argue that fresh perspectives are required in understanding these contestations and dilemmas and varied reasons behind peasants’ mobilization, social movements and participation in countryside politics.

Conclusion

Few will disagree that there has been an academic bias towards studying progressive movements and movement in relation to the state. However, there are limitations to empirical research work done on how right wing farmers’ movements interact with a right-wing political party in power. What forms of populism really exist? What kind of resistance follows when the fallout of agricultural economy and deepening of agrarian crisis couples with socio-cultural and nationalist attributes?

The paper argues that Bhartiya Kisan Sangh (BKS), a conservative farmers’ movement, although has managed to maintain an overall agenda of ‘majoritarian Hindu cultural nationalism,’ there are fault lines seen between them and the right-wing Modi government. This can be seen partly in the increasing strength of BKS’s demands such as higher minimum support price for farm produce, ban of genetically modified seeds, lower interest rates on loans, better health and education facilities and so

on. These rising demands stand in direct opposition to the policies of the Modi government, a regime that BKS is generally ideologically aligned with. Right-wing populist governments in various parts of the world have important social base in the countryside, such as Trump and rural America. India has a similar situation, with Modi and the Indian countryside, in the form of powerful conservative farmers' movements like BKS. I argue that there are fundamental tensions and contradictions between the Modi authoritarian populist regime and its rural social base. Theoretically, this helps in understanding how right-wing populism functions in reality in the countryside; contrary to the assumption that right-wing farmers and workers unions neatly contribute to the rise of right-wing political groups. They may be more heterogeneous in their demands at ground level. In the Indian case the Modi's social base has been opposing his global and capitalist dream.

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¹⁰ This is the complete reference list of the longer version of the MA research paper and not only the one cited in this short version.

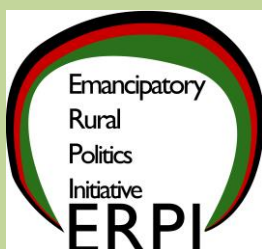
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The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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